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ABSTRACT

Because competency-based instruction assumes objectives, pre-assessments, learning alternatives, and post-assessments, college instructors must begin to establish programs with these components. To determine how valuable students perceive each component to be and to discover the extent to which students use each possible learning alternative, 60 graduate students enrolled in three sections of a graduate reading course were asked to evaluate the components as very helpful, helpful, not helpful, or not used. Four major conclusions were drawn: the use of objectives, pre-assessments, learning alternatives, and post-assessments should be continued; class sessions and textbook readings should be included and should be designed to encompass all essential information; students perceived nontext readings and nonprint resources as valuable, but few used them; therefore, they should be used only when they possess a unique value; and competency based programs appear to be a viable instructional mode for graduate level education programs. (Author/FL)

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GRADUATE STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS OF SELECTED COMPONENTS OF A COMPETENCY-BASED READING COURSE

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Introduction

At the University of Houston the first reading methods course teaching the diagnosis and correction of reading difficulties includes a study of methods and materials used in teaching children with reading problems. Since Summer, 1970 this graduate level course has been taught utilizing a competency-based instructional system. Presented here is a brief description of this course, followed by presentation and interpretation of data relating to student perception of selected course components.

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Course Description

So that the instructor might evaluate each student's level of achievement in the twelve competencies included in the course, a pre-assessment is administered to all students during the first class meeting. The twelve competencies evaluated are:

1. Understands the nature of reading and reading disability.
2. Understands the correlates of reading disability.
3. Understands the concept of diagnostic/prescriptive teaching.
4. Understands the appropriate uses of as well as the strengths and weaknesses of different types of diagnostic procedures.
5. Knows administration, scoring, and interpretation techniques for diagnostic procedures used to assess over-all reading achievement as well as achievement in word recognition skills, comprehension skills and study skills.
6. Designs diagnostic tests for use in a diagnostic/prescriptive program.
7. Designs instruction based on diagnostic information.
8. Knows lesson planning techniques that are suitable to diagnostic/prescriptive instruction.
9. Selects materials for instruction that is based on diagnostic information.
10. Modifies instructional plans on the basis of information gained through diagnostic teaching.
11. Knows methods for keeping records of diagnostic/prescriptive instruction.
12. Knows methods of scheduling diagnostic/prescriptive instruction.

If a student's test results indicate a proficiency in any of the competencies, he is not required to complete further study or tests in that area. Conversely, if his assessment indicates lack of competence, he is advised to complete further learning alternatives and tests in the needed areas.

Instructional Module

The format used in aiding students in meeting the twelve competencies is the instructional module. Each module is designed for one specific competency and the instructional objectives related to the competency are listed. Also provided in the module is a list of activities (learning alternatives) helpful in meeting the objectives. These alternatives minimally include reading a selection in a required textbook and attending a class session. However, the list of alternatives might also include reading from non-text publications housed in the university library or viewing videotape or slide-tape presentations (non-print resources) housed in the Learning Resource Center of the College of Education.

Also provided in the instructional module is a list of activities which the student may use as his post-assessment. These activities usually include a memory-level paper/pencil test, which the student takes in a proctored situation, as well as a brief application-level mini-paper, which the student writes at a time and in a place of his choosing.

The student completes each module by fulfilling as many of the learning alternatives as he wishes, and when he feels that he can meet the objectives for the module's competency, he chooses either the post-test or the mini-paper as his post-assessment for that competency. If the student's post-assessment is satisfactory, he is given credit for completion of the module.

But a student whose post-assessment is not satisfactory is guided to complete additional learning alternatives before attempting repeated post-assessment, for which the student is not penalized.

Student Perception of Selected Course Components

Between 1970 and 1975, program development and pilot studies were conducted in order to assure: (1) that objectives were appropriate for the competencies to which they were related; (2) that the textbook most appropriate to the course objectives was being used; and, (3) that the non-text readings and non-print resources were well-suited to the objectives for which they were recommended. Furthermore, the two alternatives for post-assessment were evaluated and equated in difficulty for each module.

Data Collection

During this same time period a form for data collection was developed, and data was obtained from students during each semester. Each student reacted to course components by evaluating them as very helpful, helpful, not helpful, or did not use (indicating that the student did not utilize the component listed).

Interpretation of the collected data indicated student perception of the components of each instructional module: the learning alternatives (textbook readings, class sessions, non-text readings and/or non-print resources) and the post-assessment activities (post-test and mini-paper). Additionally, students were asked to respond to the use of objectives, the use of learning alternatives, and the use of post-assessment alternatives by rating each according to the same four possible responses.

Treatment of the Data

The collected data was analyzed in two ways. First, the students' ratings of each individual component in each module were assessed. For example, all responses indicating Class Sessions as very helpful were totalled for all modules. Second, the usage of each component which represented an alternative was assessed. For example, the number of responses indicating use of a videotape were tallied in the category Non-Print Resources.

Results

Since Fall, 1975, three classes totalling sixty students have been polled to discern student reaction to specific components of this course. The plurality of student responses indicated that the following components were very helpful.

1. Objectives (by module) - 63%
2. Pre-Assessment - 79%
3. Class Sessions - 72%
4. Textbook - 62%
5. Audio-Visual Materials - 100%
6. Paper/Pencil Post-Tests - 56%
7. Mini-Paper - 57%
8. Objectives (as a group) - 79%
9. Choice of Learning Alternatives - 66%
10. Choice of Post-Assessment Activities - 80%

Similarly, the majority of student responses consistently indicated Non-Text Readings (54%) as helpful.

The responses also indicated student usage of each learning alternative.

1. Class Sessions - 98%
2. Textbook Readings - 89%
3. Non-Text Readings - 38%
4. Non-Print Resources - 6%

Similarly, data showed that the post-assessment alternative used most often was the memory-level post-test (60%).

Implications

Four major implications may be concluded from the above data. (1) Objectives, pre-assessments, and post-assessments are perceived as very helpful by students, as are multiple learning alternatives and post-assessment alternatives. Thus, continued use of these instructional strategies is indicated.

(2) Class sessions and readings from required textbooks were used almost universally as possible learning alternatives. Therefore, these learning alternatives should be included whenever possible and should be designed to encompass all essential information.

(3) Even though non-text readings and non-print resources were perceived by students as valuable, very few students used them. This data carries the implication that these learning alternatives are not necessary in establishing a competency-based program. But, when these alternatives possess unique value, they might be included as part of a class session so that more students are exposed to them.

(4) Perhaps the most important finding is that competency-based procedures including instructional modules appear to be a viable instructional mode for graduate level education courses.